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ABSTRACT

Recent studies on correctional education point to the value of such programs in helping to train and rehabilitate those inmates disposed to such opportunities. Because of their vocational curricula and community service orientation, community colleges are in an ideal position to educate prison inmates. While in 1965, only 12 correctional education programs were in operation, by 1982 at least 350 functioning programs were reported. Three-quarters of these programs are sponsored by community colleges, which provide courses that range from basic math and reading to vocational instruction. Over 80% of the programs are held inside of the prisons, and most are staffed by part-time faculty. Recent studies have shown that prison programs have produced positive behavioral changes, improved math and verbal skills among student inmates, and may account for a decrease in the recidivism rate of inmates who receive vocational training. Along with such benefits, prison programs also encounter problems including an unstable financial base, inadequate coordination and articulation among prisons, interagency and interpersonal conflicts, and high faculty turnover. In many cases, faculty are unprepared for the significant differences in the environment and their roles between regular classroom instruction and prison instructors, and many burn out quickly. Important characteristics for correctional program teachers include good listening skills, the ability to curb their own aggressive behavior, the capacity to work effectively in a relaxed classroom atmosphere, and the ability to work one-on-one with students. (GFW)

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Correctional Education and the Community College

Dana Nicole Williams

Introduction

Since the first college program for inmates was established in 1953, increasing numbers of universities and colleges in the United States have developed correctional education programs.

The main objectives of these college-run programs are to provide a quality education for those inmates showing potential and enthusiasm; improve inmates' academic and vocational skills; change the inmates' attitudes regarding work and responsibility; and prepare inmates for the competitive job market they will face upon release.

Because of their vocational curricula and community service orientation, community colleges are in an ideal position to educate prison inmates.

Scope

In 1965, only 12 correctional education programs were operating in the United States. By 1982, according to a national study conducted by Wolford and Littlefield (1985), there were 350 programs, with over 120 new programs developed between 1976 and 1982 alone (p.258).

Approximately 27,000 inmates, representing almost 9% of the total population of incarcerated adults and adolescents in the country, were receiving some form of post-secondary education. Responses from 228 of the 316 colleges and universities sponsoring prison programs revealed that:

1) community colleges and vocational/technical colleges sponsored 75% of the correctional education programs in the country;

2) 42.7% of the programs were located in rural areas, and 60% were held at maximum or medium security prisons;

3) courses offered to the inmates ranged from basic math and reading skills to vocational instruction in a variety of subjects including horticulture, food service, auto mechanics, and custodial training;

4) the highest degree offered by 74.5% of the programs was an associate degree or certificate;

5) admissions requirements generally differed from standard college policies in that potential testing, skills assessment, and records of previous behavior were often used in admissions decisions;

6) 83.3% of the classes were held inside the prison, while 13.5% were offered through correspondence courses, telecourses, or other electronic media; and

7) programs were generally staffed by part-time faculty and program administrators.

Maximum security inmates are usually males, with little or no education and very few employable skills (Gendron and Cavan, 1988). According to Wolford and Littlefield, "nowhere is there a population more in need of viable opportunities for change than within our correctional facilities" (p. 271). Studies on the effectiveness of prison programs indicate that post-secondary correctional education can effect significant changes in prisoner behavior and skill levels. Regarding Southside Virginia Community College's (SVCC's) program at Mecklenburg Correctional Facility, Gendron and Cavan (1988) reported that all inmates recognized a change in the prisoners enrolled in the SVCC program. In addition, they found that the program has provided "a positive direction to the lives of men wandering aimlessly through the penal system" (p. 4); and that having attainable goals and a healthier self-image improved the behavior of the inmates.

In another study conducted at a juvenile facility, Grissom and McMurphy (1986) found those involved in college-prison collaborations showed strong gains in math and verbal skills and that behavioral changes, though modest, were consistently positive. College involvement contributed to the youths' self-image and helped to neutralize the effects of the "prisoner" label. Vocational programs seemed to help students develop good work habits and favorable attitudes toward employment. The program also had positive effects on attitudes toward learning.

Perhaps more importantly, the programs also affect inmates' behavior after leaving prison. Allen (1988) cited findings from a University of Oklahoma study, showing that fewer than 25% of the inmates who had received vocational training in prison returned to the penal system following their release, compared to a recidivism rate of 77% for the general prison population in Oklahoma.

Problems Encountered in Correctional Education

The source of funding for prison programs varies from school to school. Wolford and Littlefield (1985) reported that the most frequent sources of funds were Pell Grants, state incentive grants, and contractual arrangements between the college or university and the department of corrections. Conrath (1986) highlighted the problems related to the need to reapply for funding on an annual basis, the diversity of funding sources, and the difficulties of obtaining needed supplies and equipment and of maintaining a stable staff. Conrath suggested that the legislature arrive at a per pupil allowance, which when supplemented with Pell Grants and other soft money, would provide a stable financial base for such programs.

Another problem discussed by Conrath is the need for coordination and articulation among correctional facilities to ensure continuity of education as inmates transfer from one prison to another. An inmate may start a program of study at one facility only to find that the courses he or she needs to continue that program are not available at the facility to which s/he transfers.

Conrath also noted the occurrence of interpersonal and interagency conflicts at all levels, usually because of overlapping or disputed lines of responsibility. Related problems, such as difficulties in orienting faculty to the peculiar nature of prison teaching, lack of specially trained instructors, and high turnover, were noted. In response, Conrath recommended that an oversight agency be established to provide statewide coordination and establish overarching policies.

The Teacher's Viewpoint

Prison education is obviously quite different from regular classroom instruction. In a prison, security of the inmate is a top priority and in some respects the teacher is a member of the security team. Snowdon's (1986) description of the responsibilities of New Brunswick Community College instructors teaching at the Dorchester Penitentiary indicates that educational staff are requested to report changes in inmates' behavior and appearance, to inventory property and tools, and to routinely search the work area for knives, saw blades, and home-brewed alcohol. Faculty are often unprepared for such responsibilities and the stress that they encounter in a prison environment. Burnout is a common response, and maintaining the morale, motivation, and quality of faculty is a problem for many correctional education programs.

Snowdon identified several characteristics as essential for prison faculty, including listening skills, the ability to curb their own aggressive behavior, and the capacity to work effectively in a relaxed classroom atmosphere. Instructors must be able to work on a one-to-one basis with the inmate, as large student turnover makes modular, individualized instruction the most effective format.

Summary

According to the Virginia State Department of Corrections, "people are incarcerated 1) to protect society, 2) to punish the criminal, and 3) to rehabilitate the inmate" (Gendron and Cavan, 1988, p. 2). This third purpose, "rehabilitation," suggests a community responsibility to help inmates properly integrate into society.

Studies continue to validate the benefits that correctional education programs provide for prisoners in their efforts to become functional members of society. Especially among younger inmates, teachers see behavioral changes, enthusiasm for learning, and an increased willingness to take responsibility for their own lives. Community colleges, with their commitment to providing educational opportunities for all members of their communities, are perfect partners in the process of rehabilitating prison inmates.

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